

BB King Stayed Here

BY MIKE GERRARD ON AUGUST 3, 2015 2 COMMENTS



It was 8pm in Paducah, Kentucky, and I was looking for a hotel. Someone had told me about the Hotel Metropolitan, but the door was closed. I knocked. The door was opened by a short and rather surprised-looking black woman wearing a red turban.

'I own this hotel,' she said, 'and I'm not used to having white folks here. This is a colored hotel. You better come in off the street 'fore you gets me into trouble. My name's Maggie Steed.'

She ushered me in and closed the door. Without pausing for breath she was telling me about the Hotel Metropolitan's history, and all the famous folk who had stayed there.

'Tke and Tina stayed here, Ray Charles, Sam Cooke, Billie Holliday, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, James Brown, Little Richard, Fats Domino. I let Ray Charles stay downstairs 'cos he don't like walking upstairs.'

On the wall was a signed photo of Chubby Checker, but it was Miss Maggie, as she insisted I call her, who was the real star at the hotel.

'Henry and I... Henry, that's my husband, Lord rest his soul... Henry and I, we was taking folks in from time to time 'cos there was no hotels for colored people. I looked at my husband and I said, *Henry, we should have a hotel, a nice hotel for colored folks to stay in when they come to Paducah.* You stayin' for dinner?' 'Cos Miss Maggie knows how to cook. I took a big pie down to the lumber store and I said I want to build a hotel, and they sold me the lumber I needed. When I decided to build the hotel I had to go and tell the Lord, and then tell Henry. Well, the Lord already knew.'

Miss Maggie offers to show me some of the rooms. It's a homely place, more like a guesthouse than a hotel.



Miss Maggie

'This is Room 2, it's the best room in the house. Ella Fitzgerald used to stay in this room. She was a wonderful lady, a real elegant lady, and she deserved the best room. Now if you want to follow me I'll show you some of the upstairs rooms, but we need to be quiet, now. I got a special guest in one of my rooms tonight. If she ain't resting maybe she'll come out and say hello.'

We climb the stairs. The walls are covered with paintings and photographs, many of them musicians, who stayed at the Metropolitan when playing gigs in Paducah.

'Back in the day,' Miss Maggie said, 'colored kids didn't get to go to school. You had to pass what they called the paper bag test. If your skin was darker than a paper bag, you didn't get to go. And you had to pass the hair test too. If your hair was too curly, you didn't get no education. One of the first colored millionaires was Annie Turnbo Malone. She had ties to Paducah and she patented the pressing comb, and that enabled us to have straight hair and that's how she made her money. Now let me see if my special guest is maybe going to come out and say hello.'

Miss Maggie knocks gently on one of the doors.

'Miss Holiday, Miss Holiday?'

The door opens and a rather sleep-looking Billie Holiday steps out.

'I know we'd all love it if you could maybe just sing us a song,' Miss Maggie says, and Billie Holiday clears her throat and sings.

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

'That was beautiful,' Miss Maggie tells her. 'Thank you so much. I know you need to rest your voice, so we're going downstairs to eat.'

Billie Holiday smiles and goes back into her room, while we go downstairs and through to the dining room, where a feast of food has appeared.

'I got fried chicken,' Miss Maggie says, 'I got catfish, I got corn bread, I got collard greens, I got ice tea, I got some wine over there. Y'all just help yourselves.'

By now 'Miss Maggie' has revealed herself to be Betty Dobson, one of the women behind the saving of this historic hotel when it was faced with demolition in 1999. Miss Maggie was Maggie Steed, who opened the hotel in 1909 when she was only 24-years-old. The hotel stayed in business till 1996. Due to the campaigning and fund-raising efforts of Betty and the [Upper Town Heritage Foundation](#), the hotel was saved and is now open for tours and evening meals.

But before we depart groaning into the night, after far too much Southern hospitality, I ask Betty about one of my musical heroes, BB King, whose photo was on one of the walls. Did he stay there too?

'Well that's an interesting story,' she says. 'I always told people that BB King stayed here. So many people in Paducah say they remember BB sitting on the front porch playing his guitar and eating sweet potato pie. He loved his sweet potato pie. But when we wrote to him he said he didn't remember. I was upset but his drummer said to us: *Put it like this. BB's clothes may have stayed at the hotel, but BB maybe didn't.*

More Information

For information on visiting or dining at the hotel, see the Hotel Metropolitan website.

www.thehotelmetropolitan.org.

Main photo courtesy of the [Paducah Convention and Visitors Bureau](#).

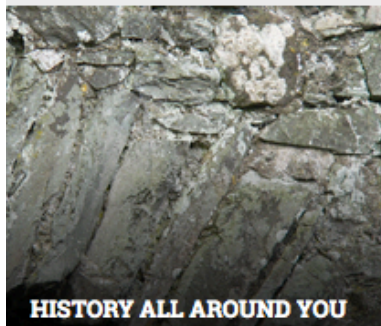
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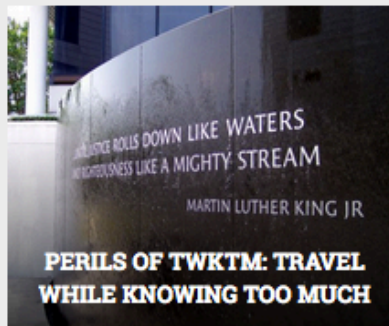
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